

THE INVOCATIONS

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NANCY PAULSEN BOOKS

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Dedication T/K

PROLOGUE

A GIRL walks home alone at night.

It's All Hallows' Eve in London, and the street that stretches before her is empty, quiet except for the soft thud of her boots on the sidewalk and the rustle of autumn leaves plucked by the wind. Hazy sodium lights struggle to shift the dark.

The girl is dressed as a witch. Cartoon-green skin, pointy hat, a fake wart on her nose. She is coming from the Electric Ballroom, where, at a Halloween concert with her housemates, she saw the boy she likes kissing a girl dressed as a sexy angel. It immediately made her regret her costume and want to go home.

Now she slips through the gap between two buildings, past the canal-side pub she comes to with her friends in the summer. A girl sits on the other side of a window decorated with bat decals, her face smeared with blood. A couple in matching hot-pink jumpsuits are breaking up on a bench.

The girl takes a few steps onto the footbridge that leads over the water and down onto the towpath on the other side.

It is here, on the bridge, that she pauses. The canal beneath her is a thin snake of shallow water. On a clear day, you can see the algae-coated detritus that collects at the bottom: the bicycles, the shopping trolleys, the tires. Tonight it is black and impenetrable. If you didn't know its depth, you might think it fathomless.

Across the water, the bars and restaurants of Camden Market are still busy with the Halloween crowd. Men and women in costumes cluster around the spaceship-red glow of outdoor heaters, laughing, drinking mulled wine out of steaming mugs.

Ahead, the footbridge slopes down to the towpath that winds alongside Regent's Canal, below street level.

The girl hovers at the edge of the dark, weighing her options.

Usually she avoids the canal after sunset. It is unlit. It is the kind of place she has been told all her life to avoid for the simple fact that she is a girl—but tonight she is cold and drunk and sad and hungry for the leftover pad thai she knows is waiting for her in the fridge. The path by the water is the shortest, fastest route home.

Yet something tells her not to go any farther. Perhaps it is the memory of what happened to her on another night like this one. The stranger waiting in the dark, all the warnings she had been given growing up suddenly manifesting as flesh and breath and muscle.

Then the girl remembers the words at her wrist and runs a fingertip over the cool metal letters sunken into her skin. Words that took her a year to find. Words that mean she no longer has to fear the night or anyone who might be lurking in it.

She crosses the bridge. She plunges down into the blackness.

The first part of the walk is fine. The path is narrow and cobbled. The canal is bordered on both sides by converted warehouses turned into blocks of fancy flats. Light from their windows reflects

on the smooth surface of the water, creating an eerie mirror world just below the real one. Houseboats sit snug against the canal's edge, the smell of woodsmoke clinging to the air around them. A huge, fat dog sits atop one, watching her as she passes. The sounds of revelry dissolve into the distance, but there is still life here. Still people to hear her, if she were to scream.

She crosses beneath a bridge. It is mauled with graffiti and lit with shocking blue light to discourage drug use. Combined, they make the place feel dangerous. She moves on quickly, back into the waiting shadow.

The next stretch of the walk is worse. There are no more houseboats. There are no more fancy flats. There is no one to come to her aid. There's more greenery along the side of the path, vines and brambles that don't lose their foliage as the nighttimes turn to frost. She moves closer to the water, wary of attackers hidden in the creepers.

The girl crosses under a second blue-lit bridge, and then a third that's rancid with the stink of urine. She makes it to the base of the stairs that leap up out of the darkness and onto the brightly lit street above.

A girl walks home alone, but not alone.

She feels him before she sees him. There's no sound, or movement, or smell. Just some primordial response left over in the blood from a time before humans were humans. A sudden prickle of fright in her gut. A displacement of energy that makes her gaze snap back over her shoulder and brings her footsteps to a stop.

Her eyes find the figure immediately, standing stationary on the path. He's a slip of shadow, nothing more. No face, no weapon, nothing to indicate that he might do her harm. Just a man.

But she is a girl. And she is alone. And it is night. And that is enough.

She ducks her head and takes the stairs two at a time, but tries to do it casually, the way women do when they're afraid but trying not to look rude. She forces herself not to run. There's no need for desperate measures. Not yet. He's just a man on the towpath at night. It would be rude to run.

And sometimes.

Well.

Sometimes, if you run, the monster chases you; this she learned the hard way.

So she climbs, step after measured step, up, up into the light. The staircase spits her out on Gloucester Avenue, only one street from her flat. She waits under a streetlight to see if the man will follow her, but he does not. She breathes a sigh of relief and turns for home. It's a sloe-black, moonless night. The kind that beckons demons out of the liminal world and brings them into this one, hungry to feed on the souls of the living. London is full to bursting with magic, dark and dangerous, if you know where to look . . . and she knows, now, where to look.

A dog barks.

The girl looks up and stifles a yelp with her hand.

The figure from the canal is somehow standing on the sidewalk directly in front of her. Closer than he was the first time.

The girl stops again. Stares. Her heart crashes inside her chest. She takes small, gasping breaths as she tries to understand the logistics of what has just happened. How could he have followed her? How could he have overtaken her? How could he have moved so quickly? There's no way. There's no way.

Then she remembers the words at her wrist.

There's no need to fear anymore.

There's heavy shadow to her right, the deep, wet shadow that trees cast in the forest. The girl moves toward it, into it, lets it devour her, and—

She steps from a bank of shadows on the next street over. A little out of breath. A little frazzled. She looks around. She's alone again. She went where the figure could not follow. Into one shadow, out of another.

A small smile on her face now, she again heads toward her flat, only a few buildings away. The price she paid for this power—blood and money and soul—was worth it to feel safe.

The girl climbs the five stairs up to her blue front door and unlocks it. When she steps inside and turns to close the door behind her, she finds the figure once more, now standing at the bottom of the stairs. He is unmoving and close. So very close to her now.

It is impossible. Men cannot use magic. This is what she has been told. This is what she has been promised. Men cannot write spells. Men cannot sear invocations into their skin. Men cannot bind their souls to demons in exchange for power.

Men cannot use magic.

And yet. Here he is. Again.

They stand still, staring at each other. Though—is he staring? She cannot see his face, cannot make out his eyes, his nose, his hair. He is empty space, a black hole from which no light escapes.

The girl slams the door closed and scrambles backward. She doesn't bother with the stairs that lead up to her flat on the third floor. She lunges into the shadowed corner of the hall, falls out of another shadow in her kitchen, then fumbles in the sink for one

of the dirty knives her housemates are forever leaving to soak.

The blade quivers like a water reed in her white-knuckled hand as she watches her front door and waits. Waits for a bang against the wood, a turning of the handle, a horror-movie moment worthy of a scream.

It does not come.

It does not come.

It does not come.

And then, when she thinks perhaps she is safe, perhaps he was no more than a Halloween prankster out for a laugh, a pair of strong hands close around her throat.

ONE

EMER BYRNE sits in a far corner of the dining hall of Brasenose College, curled over a plate laden with food. Students move in and out of the wood-paneled room, their trays neatly set out with eggs and toast and tea, not noticing the stranger in their midst. They watch their phones with sleepy eyes. They listen to AirPods. They highlight lines in textbooks as they eat. Oxford students tend to be more alert at lunch and dinner, more suspicious of faces they do not recognize, which is why Emer only ever eats in college halls for breakfast. Nobody bothers her. Nobody tries to make conversation. Nobody cares when she takes a second muffin for the road.

Outside, she unlocks her stolen bicycle from where she left it chained against the fence of the Radcliffe Camera. Emer has heard passing tourists remark quizzically at the name—“It doesn’t look like a camera”—but it has never stumped her. The word *camera* shares its roots in Greek and Latin with *chamber*. To a girl fluent in Latin and a dozen other old languages, it makes perfect sense.

As she wheels her bike through the square, she tests herself. Behind the Camera is another extravagant building: a palatial wall, beyond which rise turrets shaped like spear tips. All Souls College. To her left, a boxier more fortlike building, also of pale stone and topped with turrets. Bodleian Library. To her right, an ornate spire. University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Oxford students are expected to know the names of these buildings, and so Emer has learned them, too.

It was a confusing place when she first arrived two summers ago, frantic and afraid that she was being hunted already. She expected the university to be one big campus, not a collection of halls and buildings—residential colleges—scattered throughout the city, each with its own history and charm. Some are very old: Balliol was founded in the thirteenth century. Some are much newer, like Linacre, established in 1962, which is where Emer cycles to this morning.

Cool air needles her skin as she rides. Autumn has descended over the streets. The gutters are laden with leaves the color of honeycomb, and the sandstone buildings are dipped in blanched sunlight.

Linacre College has a gym in the basement. Emer scans an ID card that is not hers, then heads to the locker room to get changed. There, she pulls her workout gear from her backpack. A navy Oxford-branded hoodie and shorts, both stolen from a merchandise store. The clothes are musty and damp with sweat from last night's workout, and the workouts before that.

Emer runs, hard and fast, for forty-five minutes, until her head spins when she steps off the treadmill. Her muscles feel heavy, in a good way. She likes to be able to feel the meat of them when she walks. All that muscle, just beneath the skin, encasing her bones. That is power.

After her run, she goes back to the locker room and gets into the shower fully clothed and rubs soap over the fabric of her clothing until it lathers. Then she stands under the stream to wash away the sweat and grit of the past few days and the faint smell of sulfur that seeps from her skin. She takes off her sopping clothes and washes them properly, washes her underwear, too, all three pairs, then wrings them out and hangs them up on the hooks where people sometimes hang jackets or accidentally leave their towels. When all the cleaning is done, she stands under the water and turns up the heat until it sears her white skin pink. It is a stupid luxury. Even now, so many years after Nessa found her half-feral in the woods, having access to a shower makes her want to laugh and weep at the same time.

She dries herself with someone else's towel and considers her naked body in the foggy full-length mirror, admiring the thick cords of muscle in her arms and legs, the six-pack that has bloomed across the once-soft plane of her stomach. There are two toes missing from her left foot, an unhealed two-inch wound on her left forearm, and an angry red rash below her collarbone where her lead pendant rests against her skin.

Linacre women leave their deodorant here, their shampoo and conditioner, their foundation and lipstick and mascara. Emer uses what she needs, then changes back into the clothes she wore here. A tan wool coat, a black turtleneck, a tweed skirt, black tights, black boots. The same clothes Nessa shoved into Emer's backpack two years ago as she pushed her out the door and told her to run, run, they will come for you after this.

At midday, Emer goes to her first and only "class" for the day. It is a lecture on mathematics. She does not understand mathe-

matics beyond what she learned from Nessa and her mother, and her mother died when she was seven. Addition, subtraction, and multiplication are concepts that make sense to her, but she struggles to put them into practice without counting on her hands. Nessa sometimes tried to teach her in fits and starts, but Nessa herself had never gone to school, had learned only what had been deemed useful for Byrne women to know: when to plant seeds in the spring, how to turn plants into tinctures, how to speak the tongues of the dead.

Emer would prefer to attend a lecture on languages, the older the better, but those are delivered in small rooms to small classes—and they do not serve food. At the mathematics lecture, they are serving bánh mì, a pork version on one side of the room, a vegetarian option on the other. The sign above the food reads PLEASE TAKE ONLY ONE. Emer takes two of the pork sandwiches, then leaves the auditorium, comes back in another door, and takes two of the vegetarian sandwiches.

The lecture is so full that she has to sit on the side of the room, on the carpeted floor. There's a young guest speaker talking about a scholarship she won to study at an elite university in America. Emer wonders what the food is like there. Then the lecture begins. The professor writes all sorts of strange symbols on the board, as he does every week. Egyptian hieroglyphs she understands, but not these. Emer listens, and watches, and eats all four of her sandwiches slowly. When the attendance sheet is passed around, she looks at it and pretends to fumble for a pen before passing it on without writing her name down. Nobody notices. She has become proficient at being a ghost.

The lecture goes until midafternoon. When it is over, Emer

returns to the Camera and goes to the Bodleian Library and sits at a dark wood table among the dark wood stacks.

The library is why she is here. It is why she decided to hide in Oxford instead of anywhere else when she fled Cork in the night two years ago.

Here, Emer reads. The sun slants long and golden through the windows. The air smells of leather and old paper. It is Emer's favorite place in the world. It is here that she finds books left for her: at her feet, on the chair next to her. She never has to go looking for them; they just appear, as if by magic. Books about protolanguages. Books about sigils and runes. Books about Sumerian, Hattic, Elamite, Hurrian. Books about Cretan hieroglyphs and Linear A. Books about syllabaries and logograms and constrained writing. Emer reads them all, cover to cover, taking extensive notes as she goes. While she works, she fiddles with the pendant around her neck, twisting the tightly rolled scroll of lead, beaten as thin as silk, between her fingers. A subconscious gesture to make sure it is still there.

At the end of a book on protolanguages, Emer undoes the necklace and unfurls the scroll to review her work. Into the lead are engraved all the worst words Emer has found in every dead language that ever had a writing system.

Every word for *blood*.

Every word for *hatred*.

Every word for *vengeance*.

She adds a new word today, a tiny thing scratched at the very edge with a scribe, and then she looks up to watch the other people in the room, their heads buried in books and laptops in silent contemplation. They are all so clean. They all sit so straight.

They are all so sure they belong here. Emer studies them carefully and tries to emulate them. The lines of their spines. The way their eyes squint when they work through the problems on their screen, frustrated but confident in their ability to prevail in the end. The women are bright faced, with neat ponytails and little makeup. The men have freshly cut hair and shiny shoes. Humans are pattern-recognition machines, and Emer must try hard to fit the pattern. To not arouse suspicion.

When a man gets up to go to the bathroom, Emer stands, puts her pendant back on, and walks past his workstation. He has left his wallet in his open backpack. It still surprises her how freely Oxford students leave their belongings unguarded. How freely they trust each other. Emer pretends to drop something next to the backpack and bends down. She does not take the whole wallet. Just the things that will help her around the city. His student ID card. His cash.

In the evening, Emer eats the muffin she saved from breakfast, then goes back to the gym and lifts weights for another hour. No one questions her presence in the small room meant only for Linacre students. Why would they? Emer's workout gear is still drying, so she wears an Oxford Medicine hoodie that someone left scrunched up in a locker. Sometimes men stare at her as she passes, and she thinks it might be because she is pretty, striking even, with her red hair and brown eyes, but that is not useful when you are trying not to be noticed, not to be remembered.

What did the girl look like? Emer imagines the police asking her neighbor back in Cork. *The girl who killed your husband?*

After the weights sessions, Emer goes to the Linacre common kitchen and makes herself a coffee, drinks it, then makes another one. The drawers here are filled with tea bags and packets of brown

sauce and coffee pods and individually wrapped biscuits. So much food. She thinks of the nights she spent in the woods around Lough Leane as a child, cold and starving and wild, when there were drawers like this at Oxford the whole time. She takes four biscuits and puts them into her backpack. Then she takes four more, two for each pocket of her coat.

It is night now. The sky is clear, the college gables bleak and Gothic in the gloaming. Emer rides to Franco Manca and lingers outside, waiting for a table of students to leave. It does not take long. Three girls stand and wander out, chatting and laughing as they go. There is still half a pizza on their table, a plate of salad, a beer that has barely been touched. Emer slips inside the restaurant and sits where the girls were sitting and eats everything they left behind. She takes her time. She savors the pizza. She sips the beer slowly. When she is done, she leaves. Nobody stops her, because the bill has already been paid.

Outside, the town is dark and cold in the November chill, late autumn settled heavily over the streets, lulling them into an early hush. The streetlights are yellow and look like gaslight. It reminds Emer of the candles her mother used to burn all throughout the house when she was small.

It is at night that she watches men. In the day she dips her gaze from theirs, smiles at them coyly when necessary, shrinks her muscular frame to look smaller, weaker, more petite. Now she pulls her shoulders back to reveal the full extent of her broadness, feels the weight and surety of the muscles she has cultivated. Under her warm clothes she looks soft, but she is strong, and this, she has learned, makes her dangerous.

Emer follows men on her bicycle. Men do not know what it feels

like to be hunted. Men do not walk alone on dark streets and think about fingers closing around their throats or their skulls thudding dully against the pavement.

They do not think about strangers coming to their house and slaughtering their entire family.

Emer likes to find them where they sit or stand or walk, comfortable, unafraid. Because there is no need to fear if you are a man. You own the darkness. It is your space.

Emer slows her bike on Christ Church Meadow Walk, across from a low stone bridge. Folly Bridge. It is her favorite spot in the whole city, apart from the library. The River Thames is surrounded by a medley of mismatched trees; faded eucalyptus, rich emerald evergreens, and impossibly bright oaks in autumn tones of candy red and sherbet orange. It is close to 9:00 p.m. There is only one other person here. A light-haired man sitting on a bench, watching the water as he eats a burger. Emer sits next to him, too close to him, and stares and waits.

Men think she looks like prey.

They do not know she is bait.

“Can I help you?” the man asks. There is no fear in his voice, no fear in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

Emer continues to stare. “Andy?” she asks. It’s been two years since she left Ireland, but her accent is still strong.

Try me, she thinks. Try to hurt me.

See what happens.

See what I can do.

“No. My name is John.” The man looks confused. Concerned. He says nothing more. Emer stands and backs away and leaves him be.

She rides for three more hours, until her fingers are numb with the cold and the city is quiet and there are no more men to stalk.

At midnight she goes back to Brasenose, where she ate the muffin this morning. It is Tuesday night and there is a party going on in the common room. There is food and alcohol, and Emer weaves through the crowd and takes both. Nobody notices. She belongs here. A boy tries to talk to her, asks her name, but it is too bright, and Emer has her shoulders hunched again. The boy waits for her to reply, but she does not, and soon he goes away, looking at her like she is strange.

Stupid. Flirting is part of her camouflage, her disguise. She cannot be the weird girl. She cannot be the girl people think of if anyone comes asking questions.

There are bathrooms down the hall. Emer sits on a toilet lid and eats curry puffs and sips another beer and waits for the party to end, which it does at 1:00 a.m., because there are noise restrictions. The students must be well rested if they are to rule the world one day.

Emer washes her face in the bathroom and drinks five handfuls of water from the tap. In the fluorescent light, her skin is bilious. There are blue half-moons beneath her eyes. She makes a mental note to eat more broccoli, then drinks five more handfuls of water.

When the lights are turned off and everyone is gone, Emer takes out her ring of stolen keys, which is heavy because there are dozens of them on there now, and unlocks the common room. Inside, it is messy, strewn with crumbs, the furniture askew, but it is warm and enclosed, and that's enough. That is more than enough.

Before she goes to sleep, she takes the knife from her backpack

and slides the blade down her left forearm, reopening the partially healed wound that she cut last night, and the night before, and the night before, and several hundred nights before that. The blood bubbles to the surface of her skin and begins to trickle down her arm. Emer flicks droplets of it at the walls and recites the wards her mother taught her as a child as she walks the perimeter once, twice, three times.

Then she lies down on a couch, her wool coat still on in case she needs to run, and takes solace in the sound of demons licking up her blood as she falls into a shallow sleep.

TWO

IT'S 8:00 A.M. when Jude Wolf wakes, fully clothed, gasping for breath in her bathtub.

The water she jolts up in is cold and black as ink. The room—her bedroom—is trashed, glass shattered everywhere, the Persian carpets that cover her hardwood floors waterlogged.

Jude heaves a few more breaths and tries to remember what happened. The pain had started around sunset. A dull sensation in her leg at first, teasing twinges of the storm to come. She started drinking soon after dark, when the pain became blinding, brilliant, and she could no longer control the desire to claw at the wound in her flesh, to try to excavate the source of agony with her own fingernails. That's when she drew a bath and sank her rotting flesh into the hot water to try and find some relief—there was none.

Jude knocked herself out shortly after with the world's most boring magical spell: the ability to render herself unconscious.

"You miserable bastards," Jude says as she hoists her dripping body from the tub.

Jude is still dressed, as she was yesterday, as she is every day, in a finely tailored black suit, the kind her father so dearly hates because he prefers her in a dress. Prefers her black hair long, too, despite the fact that she's had it cropped in an ear-skimming bob for years.

"It makes you look like a lesbian," he said to her once. Lawrence Wolf failed, rather spectacularly, to realize that was precisely the point.

The thick sludge in the bathtub clears and turns back into water as soon as Jude is no longer submerged. She bends down and touches the surface with a fingertip. Immediately, a glob of black drops into the water. It begins to swell and cloud and boil like a Satanic bath bomb until Jude removes her finger, and then it clears once more.

She flips the bird at the bathtub, then grasps the wet fabric covering her right thigh as a sudden punch of pain lands there. It's not over yet. The aftershocks will twist in her flesh for days. She collapses back onto her bed and tries to breathe through it.

When she can move again, she stands and peels off her damp clothes carefully, as if removing wadding from a wound, then hobbles to the gilt-framed mirror on the other side of the room. There's a gruesome lesion on her thigh, swollen and gangrenous. The skin from knee to groin looks remarkably similar to a log of wood that has been chewed up by fire. It's desiccated and hard to the touch, cut through with bone-deep fissures that leak pus and sulfur. In the wound there is writing, metallic letters melted into her flesh, but the skin is so warped that the letters no longer form words. It's no normal injury. It's old, and doesn't heal, and sometimes, in very quiet rooms, Jude can hear it whispering to her.

It whispers to her now. She breaks out into a sweat and presses

her palm over the foul thing, screaming from the white-hot pain, but at least her screams drown out the voices.

It's a language she's not supposed to be able to hear.

The language of demons.

The human body has a visceral reaction to it. Moments later Jude is vomiting, half from the demon language and half from the dazzling hurt of touching the lesion. The pain beats through her body in waves, washing over her and over her, radiating out from the husk that was once her thigh.

"I get it, I get it, don't mess with the occult," Jude gasps as she sinks to the debris-strewn floor.

More minutes pass. She lies still and examines her hand. Touching the wound for a moment has left a red welt across her palm. She uses the back of the same hand to wipe away a thread of spittle dangling from her lips and sits up to survey the damage to her body in the mirror.

Jesus Christ, they're going to suck me dry, she thinks as she takes in the big-eyed alien creature staring back at her. Once, Jude Wolf was as handsome as the devil and dressed even sharper. Tall and ballerina-limbed, like her mother, the late beauty queen Judita Nováková, she knew she was a total smoke show. Many girls—and some confused guys—wanted to take their knickers off at the sight of her. Now her body has grown so weak, so thin. A cut at her hair-line has sent blood down one side of her face, dried and sloughed away into a rusted mosaic. There's a crust of yellow sulfur on her tongue and several wobbly teeth at the back of her mouth where the bone has begun to soften.

Jude knew there was a price to pay for magic—there always had to be a price—she just didn't expect it to be quite so . . . gruesome.

Jude's phone rings. She answers.

"Hey, Jude," Elijah sings.

Jude cannot help but smile, annoying as that godforsaken song is. "I will never forgive Paul McCartney for writing that."

"You know, I was thinking the other day about the first time we got drunk. Do you remember? At that wedding where I requested the band play "Hey Jude" and you screamed at them until they stopped?"

They had been young. Jude eleven, Elijah thirteen, the two of them left unsupervised at the wedding of one of their father's business associates. They went around the tables while the adults were dancing and each took a sip from every glass of alcohol they could find, not realizing they were getting absolutely hammered in the process until it was too late.

"I remember," Jude says. "I vomited on the bride. That was so metal."

"That's when I knew you were my favorite sibling."

"It took you eleven years to decide I was better than the Horsemen?"

"You were an exceptionally annoying child."

"That's not true. I was an angel."

Jude hears muffled voices in the background and wonders where her brother is, who he spends his time with now that she's not there.

"Yes, thank you," Elijah says to someone else, then back into the phone: "I gotta go, Judebug. I was just checking you're still alive."

"I am," Jude says, but Eli is already gone. "Okay," she says to herself. "We play to the buzzer, Wolf." The creature in the mirror

doesn't look convinced—but what other choice does she have but to give her demons hell?

Jude moves to her feet, pulls on a silk smoking jacket and mismatched brogues, then heads off to take in the damage to the rest of the house.

She lives alone in a nineteenth-century printing factory in Hoxton that has been converted into a house. There are Persian carpets on the floors, taxidermied flamingos in the reception room, a six-seat home theater with red curtains and purple velvet chairs, three bedrooms (each with its own freestanding copper bathtub), two roof terraces, and a room in which the entire south-facing wall are Crittall windows that look out over the city in the distance. The bookshelves are packed with leather-bound tomes. There is a six-oven AGA range in the kitchen.

It's a gilded prison.

The house was given to—or rather forced upon—her two years ago, not long after her fifteenth birthday, along with a monthly stipend that allows her to live in it alone. This arrangement came with some provisos: Jude was not to contact her family again. Jude was not to speak to the press. Jude was not to be photographed in any more compromising situations. Jude was not to go back to school. Jude was to sort her life out and quit bringing shame to the Wolf name.

The rest of the place is in the same state as her bedroom. Glasses lie shattered on the floor. What little furniture she has is upturned. There are holes in the walls, some putrid-smelling dark ooze—pus from her wound?—smeared on the windows. The first time this happened, Jude thought she'd been robbed while she was blacked out. It was only after installing surveillance cameras and reviewing the tapes from the next episode that she realized

she had done this herself. Or rather, an invisible and very pissed-off demon had dragged her unconscious body around, slamming her into things.

There is a battle going on inside Jude. A literal battle for her very soul. Two demons want her alive so they can suck her spirit dry. One wants her dead so it can be free of her for good. She has to live with all three of them fighting for supremacy.

In the kitchen, the fridge is open, smashed bottles of sauce congealing on the floor—but the coffee machine has mercifully been spared.

Jude makes two espressos, as she does every morning. “One for you, one for me,” she says to the floor-to-ceiling photograph of her mother as she slides to the ground cross-legged and pushes one of the coffees toward it. Judita looks down at her with bright, clever eyes—the same eyes as Jude’s—and Jude wonders what became of her mother’s soul. She knows very well that demons are real and that the devil is, too. The rest, she is unsure about. What happens to people after they die?

After coffee, Jude begins her day: She opens her laptop and checks the messy Google Doc of private investigators she’s currently paying—there are thirteen now—then she calls each of them, one after the other, for a status update. Most don’t answer, because most don’t believe what Jude is looking for can be found. They take her money, sure, but will they actually do the work? Unlikely.

Usually, this frustrates Jude, but today it infuriates her.

Three of the thirteen end up answering. Saul, the only PI who consistently takes her calls, delivers his update in a bored drawl; he’s been calling psychic hotlines and has racked up a £600 bill he wants Jude to pay before he delivers any intel. Jude resists the urge

to call him an idiot and explains, for the third time, that she's not looking for a psychic, damn it. Marta is more useful (this time at least; she has a tendency to go dark for months at a time); she has a lead on a young slam poet she saw perform at one of the venues she's been casing. It's a long shot—but what isn't a long shot in Jude's situation? The final contact who picks up is Harry, who isn't a PI so much as semi-competent on-the-ground surveillance. There are rumors of good curses coming out of Oxford at the moment, and Harry is studying English literature there. Jude hired him to scope out his classmates.

“So no one is particularly interested in Latin?” Jude asks him.

“It's Oxford. Everyone pretends they can read and write Latin. You need to be more specific.”

Again, Jude gives him the pitch, with more information and less patience than the first time: She's looking for a writer, most likely a poet. They will be fluent in Latin at the very least, but are probably proficient in other classical and ancient languages. What she didn't tell him before: There is—how to put this delicately?—likely to be a faint stench of sulfur to them. Jude is reluctant to be more specific than this, because as soon as you start using words like *curse* and *witch*, people immediately laugh or hang up. Or—and this is the mistake she made with Saul—they start sending every penny-dreadful psychic they find her way and expecting her to pay for the pleasure.

“Sulfur?” Harry asks.

“Yes, Harry. Sulfur. What I'm asking is, do you know any budding poets who reek of rotten eggs?”

“I don't know, I lost my sense of smell when I had COVID. Why would they smell of sulfur?”

Jude pinches the bridge of her nose and decides *screw it*. “A witch, Harry. I’m looking for a witch. Two years ago, I accidentally yoked an angry demon to myself against its will. Now that demon and I are bound together until I die, and it is *quite* pissed off about that because it’s starving. Demons expect payment for their services in the form of a human soul to snack on, but instead of feasting on me, it’s turned my soul necrotic, and I’m going to be totally and utterly miserable for the rest of my short, cursed life—unless I can find a very talented witch to fix me.”

Harry hangs up. Jude throws her phone across the room, yells, “TWAT,” as loud as she can, then kicks things with her left leg until she’s breathless.

After that, she trawls through Reddit forums looking for certain terms—*cursewriter*, *voces mysticae*, *demonic possession*—hoping for another diamond in the rough but finding none.

Midmorning, she begins the arduous task of cleaning and repairing the house. It’s a never-ending battle against the corrosive force of the curse. The dark magic has settled into her flesh and bones, but it has also seeped out of her and poisoned the walls and floors. When she moved in, the place was pristine, but like her, it has decayed. It’s always cold here, no matter how high she turns up the heat. The walls sag inward as if the bones of the place can no longer bear its own weight. Paint bubbles and peels beneath her fingertips. The electrics have had to be rewired several times, because the wires melt and fray behind the walls. There are leaks everywhere, so many now that Jude has given up on having them repaired: buckets of water dot every room, collecting drips. The lights convulse off and on of their own accord. Wind moans through cracks in the windows.

That the house is melting around her is not even the worst of it.

To be cursed is to be haunted. Dying things come to Jude in the night. Spiders crawl from their holes and contort into twitching knots as she sleeps. Flying insects fall out of the air in her wake. Plants yellow in her presence, their leaves puckered like leather.

Today there are dead birds on each of the terraces, their feathers coming out of them in clumps. Jude picks them up barehanded and feels the powdery coating on their feathers. When she was growing up in her father's tower apartment, pigeons used to hit the windows all the time, leaving tiny snow angels on the glass.

Jude sweeps and vacuums the whole house, pushing all the broken glass and dead insects into a pile for easier collection. She plasters over the new splits in the walls, spreads grout between the cracked tiles in the bathroom. When she first moved in here at fifteen, her long-fingered hands were soft. Now they are rough and callused. It's the only thing she likes about this version of her life.

As she works, Jude thinks of herself as a modern Sisyphus, cursed to forever roll a boulder up a steep hill. Tomorrow, there will be more leaks requiring more buckets. There will be more dead animals seeping from the walls.

Once, Jude was practically a princess, the spoiled daughter of a very rich man. Now she is walking nuclear fallout in the form of a girl.

It's early afternoon when an email arrives from Saul.

There's a woman with strange markings on her arm working in Harrow. Meet her here in two hours. The next line is an address. Then: *I think I found you a witch.*

Jude grins and grabs her keys.

THREE

ZARA JONES draws a precise circle around the word *curse*, then looks up, for perhaps the hundredth time, to make sure that no one is watching her. The book she's reading, stolen from a store last week, is nestled inside her science textbook, which is what she's pretending to study. It's mostly dreck, all new-age drivel about healing crystals and the power of beeswax candles, but the chapter on curses and demons holds her attention. It's why she stole the book in the first place.

Tether, she circles, then looks up again. Tethered to what, though?

It's late in the afternoon on a Wednesday. The corridor outside the principal's office is mostly deserted at this hour, the students long absconded, the teachers weary and ready for home. A tween couple walks past, their arms linked, but apart from them, Zara is alone. She pushes her metal-rimmed glasses further up her nose. They're for reading and only have a slight magnification, but the blue light filter stops her head from aching when she's been staring

at a computer screen for hours, which happens almost every day of her life.

It's hard to know how much the book in her lap has gotten right and how much is guesswork on the part of the author. Over the past year, Zara has been able to piece together a vague idea of how curses work, or at least how she thinks they might work, if they're even real. The idea of tethers is something she stumbled across only recently, but now that she knows about them, she can't get the concept out of her head. Tethers. A tether between a person and a demon, maybe?

Zara's phone buzzes in her pocket.

Another one, the message reads. It's been six weeks since the last. Zara was almost starting to believe it was over.

A second message follows the first: £500 to see it this time.

Zara tips her head back and exhales in exasperation. The first was £200. The second was £350. An absurd amount of money. An almost impossible amount of money.

Zara thinks about how much cash she has in her room, tucked away in an envelope. There might be £50 or £60 there, she isn't sure.

I'll see what I can do, she sends back, even though she knows she won't be able to raise that kind of money. **Where and when?**

Primrose Hill. An address follows. **Meet here at 9pm sharp**.

Come up with £500 in a handful of hours? It might as well be £5,000. Or £50,000.

"Zara?" Zara looks up. A man, the principal's administration officer, is looking at her. "Principal Gardner is ready for you."

Zara tucks her science textbook and Wiccan tome into her

backpack and follows him. On the other side of the door she finds Gardner, expectant. The woman is Black and stylish as hell, considered a fashion icon by her students. They rarely see her without her signature red lipstick and some form of neon on her body: neon-pink suit jacket, neon-green earrings, neon-blue slingback pumps. Some of the senior girls are trying to convince her to start a fashion TikTok.

There are three books laid out on the desk in front of Gardner, all facing Zara: *Magic and Witchcraft in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* by Harriet Owens; *A Brief History of Women and Magic* by Anna Alexander; and *Black Magic and Forbidden Rites: Necromancy for the Modern Witch* by Elizabeth T. Lee.

“Oh hell,” Zara says.

“Indeed,” Gardner replies. “Take a seat.”

Zara does.

“You really—” Gardner stops to take in Zara’s outfit. “What *are* you wearing? I’ve told you before, you don’t have to dress like that.”

Zara looks down at her outfit. Camden School for Girls does not require its students to wear uniforms, a policy that Zara scorns. Aunt Prudence would turn in her grave at the thought of what some of Zara’s classmates wear. Ripped jeans and hoodies—in a place of learning!

Today, like most days, Zara wears a box-pleat pinafore dress over a dark turtleneck, all under a smart tartan blazer, all in tones of brown. Leather loafers and chunky wool socks complete the look. She ties her hair—blond, thick, cut in a long bob to her shoulders—back with a ribbon. It is a kind of armor. A shorthand message to the world: Zara Jones is a serious and learned young woman, meant for the hallowed halls of somewhere like Oxford or

Cambridge. What she hopes the world doesn't see is that the blazer is inherited from her dead aunt and is two sizes too big for her, and the leather loafers are thrifted and have holes in the soles so that when it rains, her socks go soggy.

Zara clears her throat. "As we have discussed previously, I find the uniform policy at this institution sorely lacking. I'm setting an example for my peers on how to dress for success."

"You look like you're cosplaying Sylvia Plath."

"Thank you."

Gardner looks very much like she wants to say, *That wasn't a compliment*, but restrains herself. Instead, she motions to the books. "For an aggravating follower of rules that don't exist, this is somewhat of a surprise. Care to explain?"

Zara sits up straight and smooths out the pleats in her skirt. How to wend her way out of this one? "Well, they're research sources for a history assignment," she tries.

"I care less about the content and more about the fact you were caught stealing them. A police officer dropped them here earlier today and asked me to give you a stern warning."

The cop had threatened to come to Zara's school, but she thought it had been just that: a threat.

It wasn't the first time she'd been caught shoplifting, wasn't the first time she'd been forced to sit in the back room while an employee called the police. Zara was compliant when she was busted, mostly because she felt so ghastly when it happened. There was no thrill in it for her, no attempt at rebellion, unlike some of her classmates, who pocketed lipstick from Boots or earrings from Primark. When she did it, her hands were always sweaty and shaking. There was always a sloshing pit of acid in her stomach. Zara

was not a natural thief. She stole because she needed things and she had no money to buy them.

Yesterday, she'd gone to a boutique used bookstore in Bloomsbury. The closest Waterstones had books by witchy Instagram influencers and thick volumes on pagan rituals and Neolithic druids, but never anything that felt relevant to her project. So she'd gone to the bookstore, where the floor and walls and ceiling were all dark wood and the books were covered with vellum and locked away behind glass. It was the kind of place Zara felt most at home, among the almond-sweet pages of old tomes.

Zara hadn't even known she was busted until the officer, a man, tapped her on the shoulder several blocks from the store. Zara had sighed and nodded and handed over the three books she'd spent the last twenty minutes slipping—skillfully, she'd thought, though clearly that was wrong—into her backpack.

"Ms. Jones," Gardner continues. "This is incredibly serious and incredibly disappointing."

"Yes, I was quite disappointed in myself for getting caught."

"Zara."

Zara looks at her hands, cupped in her lap. The way people say her name now is so full of sadness. Nobody says *Zara!* with a smile on their face. Nobody snaps *Zara* when they're furious with her. It's always said with weight, with grooves of concern carved into the speaker's forehead. It's always said like an apology.

"The last time I saw you in this office—"

"I would rather not talk about that."

"No. Of course not. What I'm trying to say is that the last time you walked in here, you were our best student. You were exceptional. Now your teachers are worried for you. Your grades . . ."

Gardner keeps talking, and Zara lets her thoughts drift, as she does whenever anyone tries to give her a pep talk. Many have been delivered to her over the past year. *Keep your chin up. Things will get better. It won't always hurt this much.* But it does still hurt, and it never gets any better. Each day is like the first. The wound is not healing—nor does Zara want it to. She will not allow it. The rawness of the pain is what keeps her going.

Truth be told, she only comes to school anymore because of the library. Zara is the first person here in the morning and the last to leave. Most of that time she spends in the stacks, reading about curses and demons and tethers on the school computers or in the books she steals. Occasionally she goes to class, and teachers say her name in that sad, heavy way—*oh, Zara*—and she sits and tries to concentrate, but often she ends up laughing. Laughing at all the silly things she used to take so seriously but that now mean nothing. What use are English essays now? What use is speaking French now? What use are good grades now that her world has ceased to exist entirely?

“What do you think?” Gardner asks.

Zara has no idea what she has said.

“Yes,” she answers. “I think that sounds good.”

“Is everything okay at home? I know you’re with your uncle now and—”

Zara’s nostrils flare. “Everything is fine. Peachy. I’ve been distracted by a big project I’ve been working on, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t aware that our curriculum covered dark magic and necromancy.”

If only it did, Zara thinks. *Then I might know what I was doing.* She forces a smile. “May I be excused? I really should get back to my schoolwork.”

Gardner dismisses her with a nod. Then, when she's at the door: "Ms. Jones. Zara." The weight. The concern. Zara stops. Gardner takes a breath. "A terrible thing happened to you. A heartbreaking, unimaginable thing. No one would be shocked if you let it ruin your life—but I'm asking you not to. You are only seventeen. You have so much of that life left in front of you. Now, if there is anything I can do to help—"

"I need five hundred pounds, right now, no questions asked."

Gardner blinks a few times. There is a long silence. "That's a lot of money," she says eventually. "It would be wildly inappropriate for me to—"

"Everyone is always telling me, 'If you need anything, just ask.' So I'm asking. I need five hundred pounds. That is how you can help me."

Zara doesn't think Gardner will do it, but the next moment she goes digging in her handbag and comes up with a handful of coins and some notes. "I have"—she counts it—"forty-seven pounds. Oh, wait." She fishes in her coat pocket (killer neon tartan). "There's an extra five," she says, holding up another note. "Fifty-two. Will that suffice?"

"If the answer on a math exam was five hundred and I wrote fifty-two instead, would that suffice?"

Gardner leans back in her chair with her lips pursed, cool as hell.

Zara knows she's taken it too far. "Sorry. I apologize, that was rude of me. Thank you. I do appreciate it. I'm trying to . . . I am trying. I promise."

"Are you? Because it sure doesn't look that way to me."

"I am. In my own way. I'm trying to—" Zara stops, because

there's no way to explain what she is trying to do without sounding like she's unhinged. "I'm going to fix everything."

Gardner frowns. She looks worried. "It's very type A to think that you can fix everything." She picks up a pen, writes something on a piece of paper, slides the paper across the desk. "My personal phone number. Any time of the day or night you need someone to be there for you, you call me, okay? You need to know that there are people in your life who care if you succeed."

Zara takes the paper and shoves it in her jacket pocket, knowing full well she'll never use it. "I need to keep the books."

"For your project."

"For my project."

"The cop brought them by because he was very concerned about their content. Wanted me to have a strong word with you about how damaging demonic themes can be for young ladies." Gardner stacks the books up and slides them across her desk too, along with the money. "The school can pay for them and add them to the library when you're done. I don't want to see you in here again, and I don't want any more visits from the police. Understood?"

Zara nods and then leaves Principal Gardner's office £52 and three books richer than when she entered. Not a bad afternoon, all in all.

She walks home quickly. It's Wednesday, November 1, the day after Halloween, and there are still decorations out everywhere. Shop fronts are painted with hollow-eyed pumpkins and bent-branched trees. Houses have fake spiderwebs cast over hedges and CAUTION DANGER tape crisscrossed over doorways. The weather seems to have changed overnight, the last of the autumn

warmth giving way to bruised skies and gusting winds, a dusting of nicotine-yellow leaves tossed across everything.

Zara lives not far from her school in a one-bedroom flat with her uncle in an ex-council estate in Camden. Uncle Kyle bought the place fifteen years ago and thought he was very smart at the time, twenty-one years old and already on the property ladder. Then his career as the front man of an emo band failed to gain traction—shocking, really—and Kyle Jones has been stuck paying off his interest-only mortgage ever since.

Zara looks up at the window of Kyle's flat. The curtains are drawn, the room beyond them seemingly dark. She calls the landline. (Who still has a landline?) When no one picks up, she figures it's safe to go inside. It is not until she has her keys in the lock, not until she's turned the door handle and heard the electronic pop of a machine gun that she realizes Kyle is home and it's too late to back out now. Kyle is sitting on the couch with the lights out, buried in the nest of blankets he sleeps in every night, playing *Call of Duty*. The place stinks of weed, as per usual. Kyle is still in his pajamas, as per usual.

"Where have you been?" he asks without looking away from the TV.

"At school," Zara says brightly as she slips past him into her room. The only bedroom. "You know, the institution I go to every day."

"Yeah fucking right."

Zara closes the door and waits. Sometimes, when he is very angry with her or with the game or with the state of his life, he will throw down his controller and storm in here. Zara never knew why it was called storming before she came to live with Kyle

last year, but now she thinks she understands. When Kyle doesn't come, Zara lets out her breath. She wishes the flat was on a lower floor so she could shimmy in and out without ever having to see him. It's something she fantasizes about often. A year ago, she daydreamed about being the youngest woman to win the Nobel Prize for physics (Marie Curie was thirty-six—a difficult record to beat, certainly, but one Zara was sure she could surpass). Now this is what passes for fantasy: having a room slightly closer to the ground.

Zara goes to her bed and pulls out the suitcase from underneath it. It is neatly organized and contains things she wants to keep hidden from Kyle: her research journal, Prudence's old chessboard, a vacuum-packed bag of Savannah's favorite clothes, a bottle of Savannah's perfume, and everything she has collected over the past year. Everything she thinks she will need for her project. There are candles and bags of salt and crystals (back from when she thought they might work—she knows now that they won't).

The envelope is there, on top where she left it, but now it's empty.

It's empty.

Zara slams her door open so hard she hears the knob crack the plasterboard of the wall behind.

Kyle looks up, a bolt of anger already wedged between his eyebrows.

"Where's my money?" Zara demands.

"What money?"

"The money I keep in an envelope under my bed."

"Oh, that money. That's your rent money."

"You took it. You went through my things."

“You think you can live here for free? Eat my food? Use my electricity? I put a roof over your head, Zara. You can contribute.”

“I sold things online to get that money. I sold *Savannah’s* things.”

All sold on Vinted, strangers sending her messages asking, **Hi, would you sell this for £5?** like they weren’t buying sacred shrouds of the departed.

“Good,” Kyle spits. “Not much use in keeping a dead girl’s stuff around, is there?”

Zara thinks about killing him. She thinks about the IKEA knife in the kitchen, the silver one that is barely sharp enough to hack through an onion these days, but pointy enough that it could surely sink into Kyle Jones’s gut deep enough to do some damage. Zara curls her fingers into a fist and lets herself imagine how deliciously satisfying it would feel to stab him.

“Give it back,” Zara says through gritted teeth.

“Bugger off, Zara. I’m busy.”

“*Give it back*,” Zara says again, more forcefully this time.

Now Kyle is pissed. “Don’t you tell me what to do. What’s all that weird shit under your bed, anyway? I want that out of my house. You hear me? You better clear all that shit out or I’ll burn it. I’ll burn every goddamn thing in there.”

Zara stalks past him—she doesn’t storm, only Kyle storms—and heads for the front door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks her.

“Out,” Zara says as she slams the door behind her. She will pay for this later. Kyle hates slammed doors. It’s disrespectful, he says, like respect is something he deserves. Soon, once he has finished his stupid game, he will go and inspect the cracked plaster

in her bedroom, and because he has nothing better to do with his time, he will let his anger about it fester. Then it will spill out of him in a torrent the next time he sees her, even if she stays away overnight.

Downstairs, Zara punches Kyle's junk box of a car so hard that her knuckle splits. The car is undamaged. Zara sits in the gutter and watches her blood drip onto the concrete as the sky darkens overhead. People pass by and see her. They mind their own business. It's that kind of neighborhood.

If Aunt Prudence could see her now! She'd no doubt call her behavior boorish. Beneath her. That was the very worst insult Prudence could muster.

Zara sucks on her split knuckle and inhales deeply.

I did not come this far to only come this far, she chants in her head, a motto borrowed from Pru. *I did not come this far to only come this far*.

With her eyes closed, Zara pictures Prudence, all six foot two of her. Her pale, papery skin, her hair in rollers, her teeth always slightly smudged with lipstick. A large woman in every way: in height, in intellect, in presence. She took up every room she walked into, enlivened every conversation. There is a picture of her on Zara's phone, taken several weeks before she died. In it, Pru, eighty-two, drinks whiskey on the rocks and smokes a cigar. "Refreshing for the lungs, I do not care a lick what young doctors think they know now." She died, of course, from lung cancer.

God, Zara had loved that woman.

What would Pru do? What would she tell her, if she were here?

I did not come this far to only come this far.

Zara knows that she's not grieving like a normal person. Zara

knows she is not grieving for Savannah in the same way she grieved for Pru. Pru was old. Pru was sick. Pru was ready to go. Pru saw death as a mercy and welcomed it when the time came—but Savannah was ripped from the world against her will.

It is not fair.

It will not stand.

When it comes to Savannah, if there really are five stages of grief, Zara has never made it past the second: anger. She is furious. It bubbles and boils inside her, barely contained by her neat exterior. Fury is what drives her, what fuels her, what flows through her veins and keeps her heart beating. Before, Zara used to think that if anything ever happened to Savannah, she would cross into the afterlife and snatch her back from the jaws of death—and then something did happen to Savannah, and Zara discovered that she was powerless.

But maybe not for very much longer.

Pru would not give up on something she cared about (heck, she didn't even give up smoking, even at the end)—and neither will Zara.

She wipes the mist from her eyes, opens the stolen Elizabeth Lee book that Gardner let her keep—*Black Magic and Forbidden Rites: Necromancy for the Modern Witch*—chooses what she deems the most promising ritual, then stands and heads toward the cemetery.

I did not come this far to only come this far.

Zara Jones is going to bring her sister back.

I did not come this far to only come this far.

Zara Jones is going to raise the dead.

FOUR

JUDE HAS met two honest-to-God witches in her life. One was a retired doctor who specialized in pain magic. The other was the lead singer in a band who moonlighted as a cursewriter to pay her bills. Neither had advertised their services with neon signs (neither had advertised their services at all), so when Jude arrives at the address Saul gave her and sees, in screaming-pink neon, the words TAROT CARD READING AND PALMISTRY! she is deeply displeased.

Jude parks her car across from the run-down house in Harrow and calls Saul. It goes to voice mail. “Saul, you utter prick,” she spits. “Stop sending me to psychics you find advertised in the newspaper or you’re not getting paid!”

Jude knows she should leave. Real witches are hard to find because they don’t want to be found. Plus, magic isn’t something that can be controlled or divined through tarot cards or crystal balls or rat bones cast into bowls in heady rooms that stink of incense. Once upon a time, it might’ve been, but those days are long gone. There’s very little left of magic anymore, and what remains is bitter

and strong and dangerous. It is kept hidden from the world. That is the only way for those who practice it to survive.

Still, there's something raw and hungry inside her. It is desperation. It is hope—hope that this time, maybe, she will find the person who will fix her, who will open a door back to the life of warmth and luxury and belonging and comfort that she lost—and hope has a way of making smart people do stupid things.

“Screw it,” she says as she gets out of her car and walks toward the door, the memory of champagne on her tongue.

The Wednesday afternoon sun is drowsy, the air laced with winter. Jude shudders, hikes her shoulders up to her ears, draws her coat tighter across her chest. She feels the cold in her bones now. The wind spears through the fabric of her clothes into the wound nestled beneath, where it shoots up her femur and into her hip socket. The joint there is stiff and swollen with some ungodly supernatural arthritis that makes her skeleton actually creak like the bough of a tree in a storm. Jude moves slipshod across the layer cake of sodden leaves collecting in the gutter and on the footpath.

The front door is half-open. “Hello?” Jude calls into the hall. There's no answer. She steps inside. The place smells, predictably, of sandalwood incense and burned sage, undercut with cigarette smoke. Dumb hope pushes Jude farther, lures her deeper. In that moment, she despises herself. Despises how vulnerable and pathetic her need has made her. The air in the house is warm and stagnant, the heater turned up too high. Wind chimes plink from somewhere nearby.

“Hello, Jude,” comes a woman's voice. “I've been waiting for you.”

“Oh hell,” Jude says when she sees her, because the woman is

ridiculous. She's a generation behind the modern Instagram mystics, whom Jude has also met a handful of, sleek young businesswomen who charge £100 an hour for card readings and sell crystals and shells in their online stores. This woman is dressed like a fortune-teller you'd hire for a child's birthday party, complete with a headscarf with a row of coins dangling across her forehead.

"I'm Cassandra," the woman says. Of freakin' course.

"I'm leaving," Jude replies.

"You're a skeptic. That doesn't bother me. I've changed the minds of skeptics before."

"Trust me, Cass, I'm the furthest thing from a skeptic there is."

"What can I do for you?"

"What *can* you do for me?"

"Saul told me you're looking for someone like me. That's all I know."

"You're the psychic. Can't you figure it out?" Cassandra says nothing. "Fine. Let's give you a whirl. Why not, since I came all this way. I'm plagued by demons, Cass."

"Personal demons? Addiction, depression?"

"No. Not personal demons." Jude takes a step forward. "Two years ago, I cursed myself. I was fifteen and interested in magic. Ouija boards, communing with the dead, that kind of thing. I found a very old book with a very specific set of instructions on how to do a spell. On how to bind my soul to a demon in exchange for power. I performed that spell, but because I'm an idiot, I messed it up."

The first time was the worst, because it went so catastrophically wrong. When Jude accidentally yoked a demon to her soul against its will, her body bore the brunt of the damage. The force of the curse cracked her femur—the strongest bone in the human

body—in four places. There was bruising from her navel to her ankle. ER doctors assumed she'd been in a car accident. She was hospitalized for three months and endured having her leg wound debrided—stripped of the rotten flesh. Nurses often vomited when they changed the dressing. They always apologized when it happened. It wasn't like them, they said, to be squeamish—but Jude knew that this was no normal wound. It smelled of sulfur and sewage. Even she was repulsed by the sight of it, the smell of it.

Those were long, lonely months spent in appalling pain and punctuated with the daily sting of regret that she'd done this to her bloody self. The only person who came to visit was Elijah, who told her it was *so cringe* that she'd decided to become a heroin addict because it was cliché. It was the first time Jude had heard the cover story that her father had concocted. What Lawrence Wolf believed had really happened, Jude wasn't sure.

Elijah kept visiting in secret, because their father had already forbade the family from reaching out to her. Each time, he brought with him a new book because he knew Jude was bored and loved reading. “But I don't want you to think I've forgiven you for being a tragic idiot, hence all of the books are from the list of the worst ever reviewed on Goodreads,” he told her. “Two stars or under. That's what you get.” It was the same reason he'd only bring her Double Decker bars as a snack, because they'd both once agreed they were the worst chocolate.

So, during her long convalescence, Jude read much of L. Ron Hubbard's back catalog, a gay conversion manual, and a truly terrifying children's book that attempted to educate kids on the ineffectiveness of vaccines.

By the time she was released from hospital three months later, she'd decided that Double Decker bars were, in fact, the finest chocolate the UK had to offer. She was, thankfully, still very gay.

"Jude," Cass breathes. "I have to say, I don't sense evil energy around you at all."

A slow smirk spreads across Jude's face. "Is that so?" The second time she offered up a slice of her soul to the devil, it was an attempt (a fruitless one, it would turn out) to bind the pain caused by the first stupid curse. The only thing it *did* do was make Jude's vision crack. Her normal vision is unaffected, but if she closes her left eye and squints in gloomy rooms, she can sometimes, in the sliver of space that appears between her broken sight, glimpse the realm beyond the veil. Jude does this now, and sees the blurred shapes of the three demonic creatures tethered to her soul. They are clustered around Cassandra, circling her closely. "There are three demons in this room right now, Cass. They like the look of you. Or rather, the smell. Did you cut yourself recently? A nicked kneecap when you were shaving, maybe? Even a paper cut will do it. They're like sharks. A whiff of blood, and they're all over you."

Cassandra swallows and runs her thumb over the Band-Aid on the tip of one of her fingers. "I think . . . Maybe you should go."

Jude blinks her left eye open. "Just for shits and giggles—show me the mark on your wrist."

Cassandra looks reluctant but pushes up one of her sleeves to reveal an ordinary tattoo that reads *LIVE, LOVE, LAUGH* in a cur-sive font. Jude groans.

On her way out, she calls Saul again and leaves another mes-sage: "You're fired, you useless old git."

HOLLAND PARK ISN'T exactly on the way from Harrow to Hoxton, but it's not *not* on the way, either. Jude is halfway to the Wolf home, guided there by muscle memory, before she realizes where she's going. Rain comes down hard against the windscreen, and she feels a sudden sharp ache for her old life. Because there was a life before this one. A life with a family, however screwed up they might be. A life in which Jude moved through her days with ease. A life spent in pursuit of pleasure and joy. A life with school and friends and a brilliantly glowing future.

Now that she's close, Jude wants to see the place, even though she's banned from being anywhere near there. She drives through the streets she knows well and parks across the road. The house is unassuming from the outside, or at least as unassuming as a £40-million property in Holland Park can be. It's three levels of red brick with white window frames, a black door, and neat hedges in the small front garden. A plaque by the front door reads WOLF HALL because her father read the book once and soon began claiming to be distantly related to Jane Seymour, the third wife of Henry VIII.

Nobody lives here. At least not full-time. Cousins host parties here, and aunts and uncles entertain business associates here, and Jude's brothers sleep here sometimes, to get away from their wives. Beyond the restrained façade is a vast sprawl of hidden luxury. There's a cinema, a heated indoor swimming pool, an extensive garden, multiple staff quarters, a gym, a sauna, a surveillance room filled with CCTV screens. There's also a panic room with walls made of steel that is, weirdly, a popular place for the younger Wolf family members to bring dates ("I don't know why women think it's so hot," Elijah had told her once, "but they do"—TMI, Eli) and a

terrifying fortification system that could withstand a nuclear blast or a zombie apocalypse or, like, the Purge. The family flocks here for dinners and birthdays and Sunday lunches. Many of Jude's happiest memories took place in this house.

The cover story—at her school, for her family, in the media—is that Jude has a drug problem, Jude was in a car accident caused by a drug overdose, and Jude has been in and out of glamorous rehab facilities ever since. If only. She tried heroin once, to see if it would cut through the pain in her leg. It didn't. Instead, it royally pissed off her one starving demon. If it was in pain, then damn it, Jude would be in pain, too. It spent the night throwing her drugged-out body around her house like she was in *The Exorcist*, shoving her down the stairs, then dragging her back up the stairs, then shoving her down again. Jude was too high and then too concussed to care much. Sure, why not, get it over with, she remembers thinking. If she died, the putrid tether that bound them would break and the demon would be free.

By the time Jude woke in the morning, sprawled out and bleeding on her reception room floor (nothing new), her entire house was trashed (nothing new) and the gut-deep, nerve-plucking, slowly spreading rot pain in her thigh (nothing new) was worse than ever. Jude has sworn off opioids ever since. That did not stop the manufactured rumor that she was a habitual drug abuser from spreading. Even her brothers believed it. It made more sense and required far less explanation than the truth, so Jude went with it. Played into it.

"Bollocks," Jude whispers as a car pulls into the driveway of Wolf Hall. She sinks low in her seat and waits to see who gets out. Her eldest half brother, Adam, more than twenty-five years Jude's

senior, followed by Dove, his daughter, a lanky blonde who emerges from the backseat wearing her school uniform.

There was a time in Jude's life when she wore the same uniform like a second skin. A time not so long ago when putting on that skirt, that jacket, that hat meant she got to spend her days reading Shakespeare and kissing pretty girls in the library stacks at lunchtime.

That is the life that she lost. That is the life that she's supposed to be living. That is the life she wants back.

More cars pull into the drive. More Wolf family members emerge. Three other older half brothers, Seth, Matthew, and Drew, and their wives. And then him, in the flesh. Lawrence Wolf. Everybody waits for him under umbrellas. No one goes inside before the king.

Even from this distance, even through the rain, Jude can see his eyes. Light blue, almost milky, like moonstones. They belong to a man with a long, thin face atop a long, thin body. He's old—in his seventies now—and impeccably dressed. The others straighten around him, their spines snapped to attention. Jude remembers that feeling, of Lawrence walking into a room, always with Adam a pace behind him, and the oxygen suddenly turning thin.

Drew darts over to him now with an umbrella. Lawrence brushes him off, continues walking through the rain with Adam at his side. Drew stares after them, his expression somber. It changes so quickly with their father. You can be bathed in the golden light of his favor one moment, outcast the next—but damn, does it feel good when he throws a bone your way, tells you you are good, shiny, worthy, loved. It's like a drug, and they all take hits of it, all

of the siblings, because no one can make you feel more invincible than Lawrence Wolf—until he tears you down.

All her life, Jude has heard fantastic and terrible stories about her father. Lawrence Wolf is cutthroat, they say. Lawrence Wolf is unscrupulous. Lawrence Wolf is a monster. Many of the more sordid tales she does not accept—*cannot* accept. After all, how could her beautiful mother have fallen in love with a *monster*? How could Jude have come from a *monster*?

When Jude was moving out two years ago, she came across some old boxes of her mother's things stored in the attic. Inside were pieces of clothing from some of Judita's short-lived modeling career: early 2000s couture from Chanel and Jean Paul Gaultier and Versace, all stored in tissue paper. The next box was shoes and accessories. The boxes farther back in the attic contained books and paperwork and stacks of different-size photographs bound with elastic bands.

There were pictures of Lawrence and Judita on their wedding day. Jude had never seen them before. Judita was young and enigmatic-looking, her cheeks notched, her black hair slicked back against her scalp in a tight ponytail, her clever eyes staring just above the lens of the camera. Lawrence looked old enough to be her father, because he was old enough to be her father. Judita was twenty-five and Lawrence was already past fifty. Yet even Jude had to admit that they looked . . . happy. Judita had her hand on Lawrence's chest, her shoulder angled toward him seductively—and Lawrence was smiling. *This* was the man Jude longed to know, to be loved by.

Lawrence Wolf does not smile, not anymore.

If the couple looked happy, Jude's older half brothers most

certainly did *not*. They made no attempt to mask their loathing, solemn as pallbearers at a funeral.

Less than four years later, Judita fell off Lawrence's yacht and drowned.

There's a sudden rap at the passenger-side window, a face pressed close to the glass.

"Jesus," Jude says as she jumps in her seat.

"Unlock the door," Elijah orders.

"No."

"I've already caught you stalking me, so why don't you make this less embarrassing for yourself and just open the door."

"Fine." Jude unlocks the door, and Elijah slides inside.

Even though they are half siblings, they look alike. All of Lawrence's eldest sons are golden-haired and classically handsome, but Eli and Jude are both sharp, gaunt, pale. The black sheep, they call themselves.

Elijah looks her up and down, sips a breath, and—dear God, Jude could die from the shame of it—immediately winds down the window to let in fresh air. Jude has gotten used to her own stench, the vapor that rises from the puckered basin of wet skin on her thigh.

"How's your junkie mother?" Jude asks him.

"Still alive. More than I can say of yours."

"Ouch."

Jude's mother was a dark-haired, lissome model from the Czech Republic. Elijah's mother was a dark-haired, lissome model from some other Eastern European country (Lawrence Wolf has a type). Unlike Judita, though, Drahoslava is still alive enough (though barely) to show up in the tabloids from time to time, spending her chunk of their father's fortune on champagne and younger men.

Jude has a soft spot for that mess of a woman, just as Drahoslava has a soft spot for the boy she squeezed out between coke binges.

Of her five older brothers, Elijah is her favorite. The four eldest boys, from Lawrence's first marriage to his college sweetheart, are much older than them. They have wives and children and perfectly respectable jobs at their father's company, none of which Jude finds particularly interesting (except, perhaps, for the wives—total bombshells, all of them).

There have been more women since her own mother. More lovers and more wives. More siblings, too. Younger ones, cuter ones. Three? Four? Five, maybe, by now? Jude isn't sure. She doesn't make a habit of keeping track of who her father is sleeping with, or how many squirming, unfortunate human life-forms result from the fact that Lawrence Wolf, rich and educated and powerful as he is, has apparently never heard of a four-hundred-year-old invention known as the goddamn condom.

"You look dreadful, and you smell *disgusting*," Elijah says.

"Lovely to see you, too."

"Pray tell, why are you here?"

"I was in the area. Thought I'd swing by and say hello to the family."

"You're lucky I spotted you and not one of the others. You need to leave. If he sees you here, he'll cut you off entirely. However will you keep yourself in Double Decker bars if you're poor?"

"Prostitution, probably."

"I truly don't mean to offend you, but I doubt anyone would pay to sleep with you in your current condition."

"Maybe I could try OnlyFans. The screen would hide the smell."

Elijah rubs his eyelids with his fingers. "*God*. To think, there was

a point in my life when I was really excited about having a sister.”

“What are you even doing in London? Did Oxford kick you out already?”

“I wish.” Oxford was not Eli’s idea. He’d wanted to break tradition, to study painting at Zurich University of the Arts—but breaking tradition is not an option for the children of Lawrence Wolf. The children of Lawrence Wolf go to Oxford and study something Lawrence deems useful, so that is what Elijah does. “I was summoned. Compulsory family meeting. Shit’s going down: Adam is taking over as CEO of the company, and Lawrence is getting married again.” Elijah watches Jude for her reaction; she manages to keep her face expressionless.

“I can’t believe Lawrence is retiring,” she says eventually.

“His fiancée is, like, twenty-three and pregnant with twins. He wants to move to the countryside and—I quote—‘finally have a family.’”

“Wow. It’s almost like he doesn’t have a dozen children already. How did the Horsemen take the news?”

“Oh, it was all very *Succession*. Seth lost his mind when Adam made the announcement, disappeared for three days. We finally found him camped out in the Forest of Dean, half naked and hypothermic, high on magic mushrooms.”

“As if it was ever going to be Seth.”

“I know, right? I’d almost feel sorry for him if he wasn’t such an abominable prick.”

Elijah has never had an easy time with the Horsemen. They tolerated Jude, were sometimes even kind to her, especially Adam, whose daughter is the same age as Jude. The others—Seth,

Matthew, Drew—were not so charitable. They called Eli “Gollum” and “the bastard,” taunted him, tormented him constantly. When he was a child and they were old enough to know better, they put a python in his bedroom while he slept. A freakin’ *python*. Elijah woke to the snake in his bed, its polished scales cool against the bare skin of his chest. Eli panicked, shrieked, thrashed. The snake, no doubt also terrified, bit him once on the face before Eli managed to roll out of striking range. He still has puncture scars on the left side of his jaw and has never forgiven his brothers for the attack. Jude doesn’t blame him.

“So when’s the wedding?” she asks. “Maybe I’ll crash.”

“Sunday.” Elijah is quiet for a moment, and then he asks the question he’s been waiting to ask: “Jude. Are you . . . okay?”

“Whyever would you think I’m not?”

Elijah looks her up and down again, then checks the time on his Patek Philippe. (Lawrence bought one for each of his sons upon their acceptance into university. Jude has—*had*—been looking forward to receiving her own. A tangible token of affection from a man whose approval she still wants, despite everything.) He sighs. “Now I’m late. You know he hates that.” Elijah grips Jude by the shoulder. “Whatever you did to piss him off—please fix it. I miss you. Don’t leave me alone with these intolerable psychopaths.”

“I’m working on it. Believe me.”

“Don’t come here again, Judebug. Don’t risk it.” Elijah gets out of the car and runs through the rain. A staff member opens the front door for him and then they’re both swallowed by the cavernous house along with the rest of the family. The night will be bright

with champagne and plates of colorful food prepared by the small army of private chefs who follow Lawrence everywhere he goes.

Jude's phone vibrates in the center console.

Another one, the message from an unknown number reads. A second message follows: £1000 to see it this time.

About bloody time, Jude types back.

Primrose Hill comes the reply, followed by an address. **Meet me tonight at 9pm sharp.**